
Reading Culture in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article discusses the reading culture in Nigeria. It deals with issues such as colonial legacy, early reading cultures, languages dilemmas, educational problems and how to define a reading culture. Recent changes and the rise of digital possibilities is also discussed and explained. What sets this article apart is that it explores the writings of many different people, that it covers a relatively long period of time and that it incorporates theory with figures and practical examples. Karin Barber and Robert Fraser's texts provide a theoretical framework, but this article mainly focuses on conference papers found in the Reading in Africa Collection at Oxford Brookes University.

Keywords:

Publishing, Indigenous, Reading Culture, Nigeria, Educational Issues

What is a Reading Culture?

The Index Mundi definition for adult literacy is “the percentage of people [...] who can, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life.” (2013). In 2009 it was estimated that 60.82% of the Nigerian population meet this criteria (Index Mundi, 2013). Reading and writing short statements does not make one a fluent reader and would not position an individual as being part of a “reading culture” and it is therefore possible to assume that there are even fewer Nigerians that would count as avid readers. Defining what constitutes a “reading culture” comes with a number of problems which are enhanced by one’s personal opinions. In this article, the definition is going to tread middle ground and position itself between the Index Mundi definition and what might be referred to as the elitist definition, where the individual must be able to read highly advanced prose, poetry or academic monographs. The member of the reading culture will, in this essay, be everyone from the trained reader of classics to someone that reads simpler texts for pleasure. The important part being that someone is passionate about reading and takes the time to read, instead of just trying to pass an examination.

Early Literary Culture

The early Christian missionaries were the first to write in indigenous African languages. They translated the most important sections of the Bible and the first known collection of Yoruba words was made in 1817 by a missionary. In 1859, the first newspaper was published, in what is now Nigeria, and was indigenous when it first appeared (Oso, 2006). About seventy years later the literary culture in Lagos was at least three generations old, with Yoruba writing being prominent since the 1880s. At the beginning of the 20th century there was an “explosion of Yoruba-language weekly newspapers, which contributed to a public culture in which political and cultural issues were vigorously debated.” (Barber, 2006, p 397). It was also in the 1920s that a kind of populism entered the discourse. This sprung out of the long-running conflict between the Saro elite and the colonial government over Lagos kingship and resulted in the Saro elite reaching out to include less-elite members. The first Yoruba novels appeared in weekly newspapers in serial form, and poems by Lagos authors were often published simultaneously in Yoruba and English in the bilingual newspapers (Barber, 2006). Towards

the end of the 20th century in “northern Nigeria [...] a number of literary societies emerged alongside cultural organizations that championed the Hausa language and ‘Hausa customs’.” (Furniss, 2006, p 427) and there was a growth of people studying Hausa at the universities, something which gave rise to cultural events where students, writers, poets and academics performed and discussed literature

Language Dilemmas

The three main languages in Nigeria belong to three different ethnic groups, i.e. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These languages are widely spoken and all have highly standardized orthography, thus extensively written. There are no exact figures on the precise number of languages spoken in Nigeria, but estimates range between 200-500 (Oso ,2006: Ike, 2004: Ifeduba, n.d.). This can be explained by the criteria used by the Africanist and linguist David Dalby who was

“...either counting every language group that recognises itself as a distinct unit, or extending each grouping as far as it reached before its speech became unintelligible to its reader. The first tally is obviously larger than the second.” (Fraser, 2008, p 80)

Furthermore, this means that many of the potential markets are too small to publish for and the reading population within those markets is even smaller (Kganel, 2001). Many of the smaller languages do not have a standardized language orthography, and technological advancements can sometimes hinder the progression of indigenous languages. Getting the correct software can be tricky, there might be an absence of spell-check and even if you manage to get past these obstacle there are still printers that reject indigenous characters. (Uzochukwu, 2006: Kganel, 2001).

Colonial, Postcolonial and Educational Issues

The British colonisers introduced the English language, built schools to educate the local children, and it eventually became the language of officialdom. Early converted Christians, including the educated elite, made the ability to speak English into a high status symbol and the people that promoted, for example, Yoruba culture were regarded as being bad Christians.

In schools, pupils who were caught speaking Yoruba in schools could be fined and reprimanded (Ishola, 2006).

Before gaining independence, the big colonial publishing houses were dominating the African market, and important players in Anglophone Africa were Heinemann, Longman, Macmillan, Evans, and OUP. The books were often generated and printed in Britain and shipped to the colonies, and the subject matter was often anglocentric: reflecting a British culture that was alien to the African readers (Dekutsey, 1995). The Nigerians gained their independence in 1960 (BBC, 2010). In 1978 the government passed what is known as the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree, which states that at least 60% equity participation in book publishing must be made up of Nigerian nationals. This resulted in foreign, colonial publishing houses, who dominated the market, reducing their foreign equity participation to 40% or less (Ike, 2004). The publishing houses in Nigeria published mostly for the educational market, and between 1975-1995 “educational publishing dominated the industry, accounting for 80% and 77% of publishers’ total output and bookseller’s sales” (Tiarniyu, 2005, p 143). In comparison, in 1992 the same figure for the UK and USA was less than 15% (Tiarniyu, 2005).

Since independence, the three main languages, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, are often promoted by the government and given a better recognition within the Nigerian school system (Oso, 2006). There are about 22 million students in primary school and 10 million in secondary education in Nigeria (Obidegwo, 2006) and governments across Africa have provided the publishing houses with an almost ready market (Kgnela, 2001). The Nigerian government has created an educational policy which states that at least one local language should be compulsory in schools at a secondary level, thereby trying to improve the status of the indigenous languages. Yet, very few Nigerian students show an interest in indigenous language-based subjects, if they are not part of compulsory education, and very few sit for literature in the senior school certificate examinations, which has discouraged many indigenous creative writers. Between 1996-1998, 2,676 students sat for Yoruba literature, 3,232 for Hausa literature and a mere 428 for Igbo literature. (Ifeduba, n.d.). This can be compared with the equivalent for Yoruba language when, in 1996 alone, 192,963 students sat the examinations. Uzochukwu blames this development on the decision made by the SSC/GCE examination bodies to have two separate papers, one in literature and one in

language. However, only the language paper is mandatory and very few students decided to write the literature paper which lead to a fall in the demand for literature texts (2006). Kgnela explains this by stating that the students are only focused on passing the examinations (2001). However, in a more recent article, Emmanuel Ifeduba points out that the market for indigenous language publications appears to be growing and he links this development to the same education policy (Ifeduba, n.d). Another possibility, to explain the disinterest in learning indigenous languages, is that the emphasis on English has led to students getting a negative attitude. A reader is more likely to buy a book in English than in a local language, and a common claim is that it is easier to read and understand text in English (Kganelo 2001). Furthermore, many Nigerians cannot write in their local language and this is due to the fact that they are not proficient or competent enough in the grammatical structures of their mother tongue (Ifeduba, n.d.). People hardly ever read outside of their discipline and “most Nigerian graduates of all levels of education are often not information literate and/or sophisticated” (Tiamiyu, 2005, p 147).

Indigenous Publishing, Other Media and Recent Changes

The text that is translated the most into indigenous languages is the Bible, and religious organizations are still leading the way in indigenous language publishing. The problem of a poor reading culture does not seem to be exclusive to the higher classes, but is pervasive from primary school to university graduates and Tiamiyu claims that people just do not seem to read for pleasure (2005). One of the more difficult problems to overcome is that many potential book-buyers, wanting to purchase books in indigenous languages, are often obstructed by a lack of disposable income (Kganelo, 2001). Many Nigerians do not have the disposable income to buy non-essential items, and reading and purchasing books is something which many might regard as a luxury. Moreover, they might not even be willing to buy a book even if they had the necessary resources. Booksellers are also often located in urban parts of the country, therefore making it difficult for them to reach a rural audience that might be more likely to benefit from the text being in an indigenous language (Source?). In Nigeria, many authors produce their books themselves and the content is often lacking due to the absence of an editor. The pamphlets produced by these author-publishers are often of poor quality and the personnel producing these pamphlets are often unskilled (Nwali, 1991). The

availability of published materials is also greatly affected (Johnson, 2007) by low availability and high cost of paper, as well as of poor distribution techniques (Obidegwo, 2006). It is relatively expensive to set up a new publishing operation and the start-up cost was estimated in 1995 to be no less than \$250,000. Publishing is generally a rather unsafe business because it is both capital intensive and highly market-driven. (Dekutsey, 1995). The Nigerian publishers also have to deal with piracy issues, thus not getting a full return on their investment, thereby making it harder to produce new material. Furthermore, Tiamiyu claims that the authors cannot confidently trust that publishers are going to market their books properly, and that they are going to pay their royalties (2005) and Uzochukwu writes: “ more disturbing is the fact the even when the texts are in high demand and are not yet subjected to the invidious acts of pirates, the publishers are still reluctant to pay royalties” (2006, p 26).

One example of a successful indigenous publisher is Onibonoje Publishers. Established in 1958 in Ibadan, it started out as a one-man publishing company, with the founder Gabriel Omotayo Onibonoje being the sole proprietor. Yet, the company has published more than 800 educational titles since it was founded. “Onibonoje Publishers’ philosophy is to promote indigenous language and talents” (James, n.d., n.p.). 60% of the company’s output is in indigenous languages (James, n.d.). Another example is Onitsha Market Literature, a self-publishing effort by author-publishers to produce pamphlets. When investigating the subject matter of these pamphlets, E.N Obiechina found that some of the writers and publishers were “influenced by Indian and Victorian magazine fiction” (Nwali, 1991, p 66). The authors of these pamphlets were schoolteachers, booksellers, local printing press owners and, maybe more surprisingly, farmers and grammar school boys. Onitsha Market Literature attracted both literates and semi-literates who constituted in some cases both the readership and the authors (Nwali, 1991). Onitsha Market Literature did not provide the readers with an expensively produced product and the average life cycle of a pamphlet was rather short. However, the low production values could lead to more people being able to afford to purchase the literature. Nwali complains about the poor production and the unqualified author-publishers (1991), but it was a way of reaching an audience that might not otherwise have purchased literature. Dekutsey speaks about how the publishers fail to realise what the market wants, needs and can afford (1995). Nigeria is still depending on foreign publishers

(mainly from the States and Europe), especially at the tertiary level (90% is imported from abroad) (Nwali, 1991).

With the rapid growth of other media, such as TV and radio, the book faces stiff competition. Indigenous Nigerian languages are used when broadcasting news reports (Oso, 2006) and magazines such as 'The Woman Mirror' circulate about 530,000 copies monthly. Even though 'The Woman Mirror' is primarily an English-speaking magazine, they do also publish less prominent indigenous language editions (Ifeduba, n.d.). In the northern parts of Nigeria, the economic downturn in the mid-1980s created new types of books. For example,

“the founders of the writer’s circle, Raina Kama, made up of five men and one woman, rapidly gained new members from 1987 onward as they produced a growing number of new and popular titles. Seldom more than 100 pages, these books had hand-drawn covers and contained a list of titles by other members of the circle...” (Furniss, 2006, p 429).

Recently, more writers have emerged and the literary circles have been overtaken by more commercial relationships to a large extent, primarily between writers and bookshop owners. Academics are there to help both with endorsing their work and correcting the Hausa orthography and these writers can address current issues that are affecting their lives. There was an explosion of cultural production between 1987-2000, and more women have started reading as well as writing. However, the importance of other media, such as the video cassette, cannot be forgotten, and the “emergence in very recent years of literary, film, and cultural magazines in Hausa” (Furniss, 2006, p 431) are other cultural productions that have changed the literary field.

Even more recently, the spreading of the Internet has changed the publishing industry. English is the dominant language on the web and Ishola claims that indigenous languages are not in position to compete (2006). A person can now publish material sitting at home anywhere in the world, as long as they are connected to the Internet. Electronic publishing, including e-books and e-journals, gives a new dimension to the publishing industry. (Tiamiyu 2005). Print-on-demand is another resource that can come to revolutionise the world of print.

How these changes are going to affect the publishing industry is still relatively unknown, but as Ifeduba writes:

“For instance, Mabawonku (2006) points out that the South African government publishes an indigenous knowledge system newsletter which is available online. Publishing online helps them to overcome the problems of cost and minority or developing languages”. (Ifeduba n.d., n.p.)

Many would not be able to afford buying tablets or other reading devices, but smartphones could be a potential alternative.

Understanding the Reading Culture

“In the field of literature, the emphasis placed on written, Europhone texts by Western critics was to a large extent a question of sheer access. Popular texts in Swahili and Yorùbá would have been much harder to appropriate. Indeed, many critics seem unaware of the existence of flourishing, popular African-language literatures: since they don't fit the paradigm, they become invisible” (Barber, 1997, p 1).

Western scholars and critics are writing about the “African novel”, but they often tend to leave out texts that are more difficult to access and therefore leave out a part of the literary culture. Members of the nationalist African elite have been celebrating the “traditional” as “an affirmation of self-worth, an assertion that African civilizations had long had their own artistic glories to compare with those of the colonisers.” (Barber, 1997, p 1). For a long time, people have been reading and writing in Africa, but whether that reading culture has been brought to light is a different matter. The reading elites have in many cases been successful at reaching an audience by using various different techniques, but the question remains to whether or not they have reached anyone outside of the literary elite. In many instances it seems clear that they have only written for those who are almost or as privileged as themselves. A question can be raised of whether or not the book is the right medium for transmitting thoughts and ideas in Africa. This was an oral culture before the introduction of

the printing press and Fraser quotes Richards¹ saying that “There is an African way of telling a story, or of conveying information, by using parables, giving instances, and quoting riddles [...] which will be readily understood because it is customary.” (2008, p 98). This oral tradition is incorporated into the tales to make the reader understand them more easily, but there is also a different perspective on the reader that is raised by Fraser. He writes that

“Resistance to writing is comparable to the regret we feel when silently reading a play. We have gained certain benefits – silence, concentration – but we have lost a live interaction: laughs, gasps, the odd comment off. Of course we can have both, but the resistance to writing is caused by a quite comprehensible concern that one may supersede the other.” (2008, p 107).

Writing was introduced relatively late in the game and a deeply rooted tradition with the notion of sharing a literary experience, might be one of the explanations to why indigenous language publishing has not been very successful. The accounts written about the readers are mainly geared towards the elite, the small portion of the literate population that consumes what has been written by the other members, or what has been imported from abroad. They belong to their own field², but then the question remains as to where the fields overlap. There is clearly a part of the population that is reading, but is not part of the literary elite. These fields are likely to intersect with one another and the boundaries are not constant. Magazine and newspaper publishing seem to enjoy a better status and to be more common, so there are obviously people reading in Nigeria, but what they are reading might not always be of high literary merit. It is difficult to estimate how many readers there are, but these readers would fit into this article's definition of what constitutes a reading culture.

¹Richards, Charles (1957) *Helps and Explanations for African Authors: Some Forms of Writing*.

² See Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Field of Cultural Production’, in *The Book History Reader*, edited by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 77-99 for more information about the use of the word field.

Conclusion

The Nigerian indigenous language market suffers from several important problems and obstacles that are difficult to overcome. Educational publishing is by far the biggest and most common form of publishing in Nigeria and most publishers only publish in that sector. Yet, there are examples of how groups and individuals have managed to publish and reach an audience. The educational issues relating to the low interest in literature based subjects are of course rather alarming, and the focus on three main languages is threatening to exclude a big part of the population. The buying power of the market is also a problem in that people do not tend to buy literature and when they can afford it, the production values are often poor. The question is whether that matters or not. Are these pamphlets supposed to be kept, or is the most important aspect that people actually show an interest in literature? Sadly, this also means that the authors will not make any money to speak of, but they are at least contributing to the literary legacy. When printing locally and selling in, for example the market, it is a way to reach rural readers. Western publishers do still have a presence in Africa, as well as in Nigeria, but they mostly produce books in English. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are readers, but they might not be the ones more commonly referred to and they tend to read books, pamphlets or even magazines that are not within the more established African literary canon (from a Western perspective), but that does not mean that they do not exist. The early literary circles have in many cases been replaced by an author and a bookseller working hand in hand, and the more recent technological advancements are likely to make it easier to reach a wider readership. There is hope for the Nigerian readership.

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